

2

Fisherman's Wharf to Sausalito

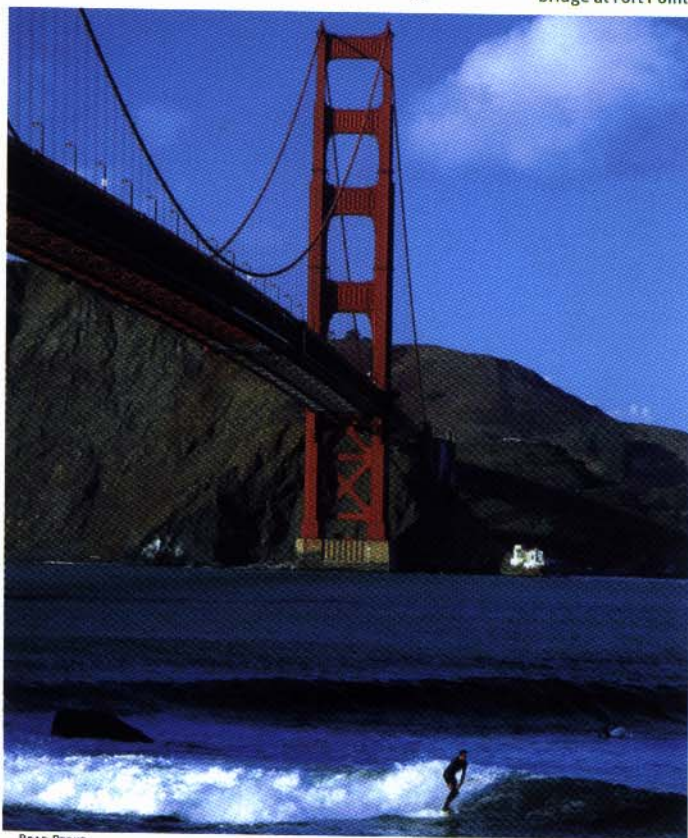
Eight-mile hike or bike (one way) along multiuse paths and surface streets from Fisherman's Wharf across the Golden Gate Bridge to the Sausalito waterfront. Return to Fisherman's Wharf by ferry.

There is no more internationally recognized site in the Bay Area than the Golden Gate, dramatic entrance to San Francisco Bay. But the Bay Trail segment that follows the city's northern shore and then crosses the signature span over the Gate has many smaller-scale treasures to commend it as well.

Heading west on the trail at Crissy Field, I watch dogs frolic on a narrow beach and windsurfers fighting to stay upright in the stiff breeze out on the Bay. A restricted wildlife-protection marsh area on my left shelters beach strawberries that lace sandy shores. Freshwater rich with organic nutrients, draining from the Presidio's Tennessee Hollow watershed, merges with tidal inflow to create an ideal estuarine habitat for yellow yarrow, coast goldenrod, and silver beach-bur growing close to the ground to evade the area's relentless gales.

Across from this fragile ecosystem are dunes like those that once covered more than a third of San Francisco, restored here by volunteers who replaced invasive exotics with hundreds of native plants. The dunes arch under succulent pink sand verbena and silver bush lupine, another plant adapted to this harsh yet beautiful environment, with ingenious pale leaves that reflect sunlight to withstand drought.

Surfing below the bridge at Fort Point.



BRAD PERKS

To the north are panoramic views of Alcatraz, Angel Island, and Sausalito; to the east, Contra Costa and Alameda Counties spread out far beyond where the eye can follow. To the west lie Fort Point and the Golden Gate Bridge, where, at this most beautiful of harbor portals, the hills of the Point Bonita headlands fold themselves into the sea. Here, amid walkers, joggers, bikers, skaters, surfers, and strollers from every corner of the world, on the border between the bustling city and the Pacific Ocean, my senses are fully engaged and my spirit is thoroughly enthralled. *Irene Barnard*



Tubbs Island, San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

3

Tolay Creek/Tubbs Island (San Pablo Bay)

Nine-mile partial loop hike on dirt and gravel levee trail along Tolay Creek from Highway 37 to Tubbs Island (San Pablo Bay).

The broad, flat expanse that borders Highway 37 between Mare Island and Novato is only a remnant of the extensive marshes and sloughs found here before much of this area was diked for farmland and culverted for highway construction. But this remnant is still one of the largest contiguous marsh systems in the Bay Area, and it is now protected within the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The only way to explore it on foot is via the Tubbs Island Loop Trail, a spur of the Bay Trail that runs atop a levee along Tolay Creek, winding over four miles from Highway 37 out to the open Bay.

While other Bay Trail segments coexist with development, offering fragmented glimpses of nature, here nothing distracts from immersion in the natural world of the marsh. As you wind your way out of earshot of Highway 37, the urban sprawl surrounding the rest of the Bay falls away. For those reluctant to peer beneath the flat surface, monotony may soon set in. For those willing to embrace the remote setting, these baylands yield some thrilling rewards.

One is the stunning 360-degree view, where the trail approaches the open Bay. The sky is an enormous canopy, the horizon stretching far beyond vision's reach, heightening the sense of isolation from the world you left behind. Mount Tamalpais, a sentinel encircled by fog, rises to the south.

Novato's Mount Burdell looms to the west. In the distance, Mount Diablo punctures the broad horizon to the southeast.

You should encounter a variety of birds on the long walk down to Midshipman's Point, where Tolay Creek enters the Bay. The *cut-cut-turr* of marsh wrens trills through yellow-flowered common gumplant along the levees. Snowy egrets and great blue herons probe among the cattails. Black-shouldered kites and terns hover and dive for prey. Below, the endangered salt marsh harvest mouse moves through the pickleweed and cordgrass, mostly hidden from view. You aren't really alone out here; it only feels like it. *Irene Barnard*

4

Point Isabel to Marina Bay (Richmond)

Three and a half miles (one-way) along paved multiuse path from the northern edge of Point Isabel Regional Shoreline in Richmond to Marina Bay Park and the future site of Lucretia Edwards Park.

Birds may not be the first thing that come to mind when people think of Richmond. But the Bay Trail between Point Isabel and Marina Bay is a bird-watcher's paradise. From the 51st Street entrance just off I-580, I head onto the trail, binoculars in hand, crossing Baxter Creek on a pedestrian bridge. In late summer and early fall, the bright yellow flowers of gumplant line the creek's banks. Straight ahead lies open water, the silvery-white Bay Bridge a mirage in the distance. I turn to the left—east—and head toward Point Isabel. A steady stream of dog walkers and dogs, joggers, cyclists, and roller-bladers flows by. Bushtits flit across the path, whispering to each other as they land in the fennel and coyote bush. A strong breeze carries the sulfur smell of the mudflats that form the crescent-shaped shoreline to my right. There, I see shorebirds of every shape and size—dowitchers, whimbrels, avocets, and sandpipers—probing in the mud, each seeking the delicious invertebrates hiding at the exact depth of its specialized bill.

In the opposite direction—west from the 51st Street entrance—a long finger of salt marsh reaches into the Bay, Brooks Island looming beyond. In one of the ponds to the right of the trail, a Say's phoebe perches on a tidal marker, pumping its tail and venturing forth to catch a dragonfly now and

A great egret admires the sunset and San Francisco skyline from the Hoffman Marsh near Point Isabel in Richmond.



JEFF CATON

5

Hayward Shoreline Interpretive Center to Oyster Bay Regional Shoreline

Seventeen-mile round-trip along multiuse dirt and gravel trail between Hayward Shoreline Interpretive Center and Oyster Bay Regional Shoreline in San Leandro.

We're starting off on a 17-mile, round-trip bicycle excursion between Hayward Regional Shoreline, with its nearby wastewater treatment plant, and Oyster Bay Regional Shoreline in San Leandro, next door to a recycling center, and I'm dubious. My boyfriend, a sometime archaeologist, has no such doubts, likening this stretch to the dumps he explored as a child, "with cool things growing everywhere." Turns out he's right. You can make this ride in just a few hours. Or you can take the whole day, stopping along the way to investigate the impressive variety of wildlife and habitats.

After coasting down the winding trail to the Hayward Shoreline, we cross the aptly named Sulphur Creek, whose red-brown water flows sluggishly near a flood control channel. This sometimes malodorous creek actually nourishes a healthy array of wildlife, and the treatment plant provides fresh water for the restored marshes. Stretching to the north and south are salt, brackish, and freshwater marshes that bustle with great and snowy egrets, avocets, and marbled godwits prowling the shallows. Northern shovelers strain small surface plants and animals through the comblike edges of their bills. To the east, raised grasslands support tangled growths of thistles and mustards sheltering the diminutive savannah sparrow.

Returning from Oyster Bay at the end of the trip, we find a small sandy beach off the spit at Johnson's Landing. We eat lunch on a driftwood log amid beach glass and pottery shards of every conceivable color: amethyst, aquamarine, Heineken-bottle green. Getting up to leave, we scan the pale and boundless horizon, here at the widest part of San Francisco Bay, and watch the clouds roll away, framing the skyline of San Francisco sparkling across the vast expanse of open water like shards of glass in the slanting sunlight. *Irene Barnard*



Common gumplant.

PAUL ROBERTSON